By Brigid O’Donoghue

Texans have always had a way of looking after their own families. Since caring for its people in need has been a Texas tradition, I’d like to introduce a “special family” that is growing daily and needs a helping hand. Today they do not need protection from scoundrels and outlaws, but from the despair caused by life-threatening illnesses and disabilities. This “special family” are children and they need your help!

Nestled deep in the southwest Missouri Ozarks exists a land of exceptional beauty. Little Flat Creek Ranch of Purdy, Missouri, is home to a wide variety of wildlife, as well as many outstanding Missouri whitetail bucks.

Since 1991, Bill Roller and his family have owned and operated a 1,700-acre preserve on a 3,000-acre ranch. Population management, food plots and supplemental feeding are some of Flat Creek’s management steps to grow trophy-size deer.

Bill, a devoted family man, has certain dates reserved at Flat Creek Ranch for only his family. But as he found out, his “family” was going to be extended by one special boy in mid-November of 2002.

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A SPECIAL BOND

John Braschayko of Lapper, Michigan, is a bright, thoughtful, well-mannered young man. Although quite gifted, John has become withdrawn when the tender age of 13 for reasons beyond his or anyone's control.

Unfortunately, epilepsy has robbed him of many of the things we all took for granted when we were young. School sports and other school functions are out due to the nature of his epilepsy. Partial paralysis of his right side resulting from brain surgery, anticonvulsant medication and word association problems have only added to his daily difficulties.

It could seem like the whole world was closing in on him, but when you came right down to it, what was left for a disabled person to enjoy? Enter the wonderful world of hunting, where you don't have to be an outstanding athlete to be an effective hunter.

As fate would have it, I had far more in common with this young man than a love for the outdoors. I, too, have had epilepsy since 10 months of age and had brain surgery at the age of 21. I've suffered many of the same problems while growing up as John has. Yes, John and I have walked the same path in life, and first-hand knowledge of his problems came quite easily indeed.

After working out the dates, as well as other details with Steve Pray, president of Benefit 4 Kids, John and his parents set out for southwest Missouri. John's chance to live his dream was about to become a reality thanks to the care and generosity of the Flat Creek Ranch. On the morning of Nov. 14, 2002, John and his parents, Linda and John, arrived and were treated to a tour of the ranch—and what a treat it was!

Later that morning, Bill took John to the rifle range to be sure the scope hadn't been bumped. As with many qualified outfitters, firearm accuracy is a must to achieve a clean, one-shot kill on the animal being hunted.

After the groups were shot and the bullet placement evaluated, Bill assured John the rifle was ready to hunt. As a memento of the hunt, Bill took the target down and wrote, "To John: Your Friend, Bill Roller."

Stepping out of my hunting blazer, my impression of John was one of joy. There stood a sweet and well-mannered young man, full of anticipation about the hunt of his dreams. As I hugged this young man I had never met before, a feeling of mutual joy encompassed us both. That "special bond" that John and I shared was about to be transported to the field in a specialized, camouflaged, hunting truck.

The ranch manager dropped Bill, John and me off in a ground stand overlooking a food plot. Brushy draws and large hickory and oak trees dotted the landscape. It was ideal whitetail cover, I thought, as we quietly crawled into the well-made ground stand. John's parents were placed in a tower stand to photograph and scout the resident deer in that area of the ranch.

Young John was an excellent student of Bill and handled his rifle with the utmost care and safety. He was as quiet as a church mouse, and we could only imagine what thoughts were running through his mind.

As time passed, I watched Bill and John whisper quietly to each other. A real bond was forming between the two and John had found himself an authentic "Missouri Grandpa."

As we sat patiently in the stand, a few birds and Missouri's beautiful landscape helped keep us company. There was a cloud cover forming and it started to look like rain. Even though the temperature was about 50 degrees, the humidity made it feel much cooler. As I wondered if the cool, wet weather was going to throw our hunt a curveball, two nice does walked out of a brushy draw on our right and started to graze in the food plot.

Since deer hunting was only a dream for John before that day, Bill quietly explained to him that some does might still be in heat. "That is a good sign," Bill whispered. "Keep watching the brush line for any movement."

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Well, there wasn't anything wrong with John's eyes; he spotted three more does bounding out of the woods to our left. After a bite of food, one of the two does in front of us acted somewhat anxious and began to walk toward the north side of the food plot.

We soon found out the source of her nervousness when a 10-point buck stepped out of the brush on the far southern side of the food plot. The buck walked deliberately towards the nervous does, food being the last thing on his mind.

Rapid relocation of a rifle can be difficult for anyone while the sight of a "shot" moves steadily away. The full use of only one hand added an element of suspense to this slowly waning shot opportunity.

Bill usually carried a grunt call during the rut and, luckily, had one in his camouflage coat. As Bill hit the call with a series of grunts, the buck stopped in his tracks. I suppose the buck thought he now had competition for his prospective mate. But whatever the buck was thinking, it soon wasn't going to matter.

Bill's quick thinking had bought young John enough time to focus in on his quarry and drop that buck with one shot from a model 788 Remington .243 caliber rifle.

What happened next can only be described as "Victory Lane." Before Bill and John could shake hands, I reached over the chair and gave our successful hunter a big bear hug. Bill also got a big hug from me for letting this wonderful moment happen.

As we drove over to pick up John's parents, a light rain began to fall. My eyes filled with tears as John told his story to his proud parents. Congratulatory hugs were in order once again.

After returning to the beautiful, rustic lodge, a great dinner awaited a crew of hungry hunters. After saying a blessing, Bill's crew of hunters talked about the hunt and the effect it had on the family. Sleep came to John that night on his father's lap in front of the Flat Creek fireplace.

The following morning Bill took John trout fishing on the Little Flat Creek that runs through his ranch. Watching them through the window, I reflected back on life's true blessings. Moments like that down by Little Flat Creek were my chance at helping enrich a child's life. In more ways than we realized, we were all blessed.

It is really hard to explain why these special hunts appeal to me. I have seen a lot of nice bucks taken throughout the United States—and have even shot a few. Maybe it's just the simple fact that these hunts are about special children who, like me, had health problems put a damper on their life and about doing acts of kindness and not passing the responsibility on to someone else.